

Body Language vs. Negotiating

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Key Considerations

- We communicate far more information to other people than is conveyed by our words alone.
- Much of this communication is less than fully conscious. Many behaviors are not deliberate, nor are we aware of performing them. Likewise, while we are all affected by the behavior of others, we do not fully appreciate how it shapes our own perceptions and emotional state.
- When people talk together, the content of what they say usually corresponds to the tone of their voice, the posture and gesture. When they feel that there is a discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal messages, most people tend to give more weight to the nonverbal cues.

Kinds of Nonverbal Behaviors

- Facial expressions
- Eye movements
- Physical gestures
- Paraverbal cues (tone of voice, pitch, emphasis, inflection, volume, rate of speech, pronunciation)
- Posture
- “Personal space” (i.e.: a portable territory with invisible boundaries that expand or contract depending on the situation; individuals carry it around with them constantly and position themselves in conversation in a way that will maintain it)

Impact of Verbal and Nonverbal Messages

- A person can convey varying degrees of impact by simultaneously using words, facial and vocal expressions, posture, and gesture.
- Experimental results have led to the following equation ¹:

$$\textit{Total impact} = 7\% \textit{ verbal impact} + 38\% \textit{ vocal impact} + 55\% \textit{ facial impact}$$

This equation does not mean, however, that words do not matter – but that we can multiply the impact of what we say if the tone of our voice and our facial expression match with the words we use!

¹ This equation regarding the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages was derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable!

Reading Body Language: In General (1)

- The challenge to reading the internal thoughts and feelings of other people is not the lack of evidence. The problem is its abundance. Micro-expressions, gestures, posture and tone of voice are part of a cascade of information that comes forth whenever we interact.
- Negotiators do not have a lot of time to discern subtle meanings; they have to interpret extremely quickly the signals sent by their counterparts, while needing at the same time to be creative, persuasive, etc.
- Negotiators must therefore be mindful of broad patterns of behavior and not futilely try to interpret each and every signal.

Reading Body Language: In General (2)

Negotiators who (...) manage to look for and listen to nonverbal cues have a distinct advantage in dealing with other people. They are more likely to know when a «yes» means real commitment to a deal and when it is said with reservation; they can distinguish real threats and promises from those which are only bluster; and they can spot confusion and unspoken anger, and thus diffuse difficult situations and build trust. People thus skilled at reading nonverbal communication may do it intuitively, but they do not have some special ESP [1]. They are simply alert to behaviors that the rest of us often overlook or misinterpret.

Wheeler / Nelson, p. 2

[1] ESP: Extrasensory perception is the purported ability to acquire information by paranormal means independent of any known physical senses or deduction from previous experience.

Controlling Body Language: In General

- We should do what we can to project ourselves positively, but we should steer clear of stagy gambits and mannerisms. Most are of questionable value. Our own discomfort at trying to be someone else will likely leak out and undermine our credibility.
- Facial expressions can certainly reveal special emotions; however, the intensity of those emotions show more in body language. It is quite easy to keep the expression of special emotions and attitudes on one's own face under control and thus to hide them. However, such feelings (mostly the negative ones) have a tendency to move towards our hands and feet, because we obviously have more difficulties in keeping them under control.

Controlling and Reading: Facial Expressions

- Even though strong biological and social forces trigger nonverbal behavior, people actually can mask their feelings rather well. In fact, the very act of covering them up may serve to dampen them.
- While we may exercise significant self-control, however, hints of emotions can leak out in what is called “micro-expressions”. These are fleeting, involuntary, and often unconscious facial expressions that occur when emotions stimulate corresponding facial muscles. People can be trained to recognize signals that may last only a tenth of a second.

Controlling and Reading: Eye Movements

- Research indicates that speakers who themselves maintain eye contact while making a request achieve a higher rate of compliance than those who break their gaze.
- Many people also regard eye contact (more specifically, the lack of it) as an indicator of a person's credibility, but surprisingly, this belief is contradicted by research. There are many benign reasons why someone might avoid steady eye contact. Some are personal – e.g.: shyness or a lack of confidence – while others are social or cultural.
- As a general rule, one should be cautious about reading too much into others' eye behavior.

Controlling and Reading: Gestures

- Gestures result from a complex mix of what we are physically feeling in the moment and what we think (scratching one's nose may indicate disagreement, but may also be an indication of an itchy nose!). They also reflect the expressive norms that we have grown up with.
- Upon his arrival at a meeting with Richard Nixon in 1973, Leonid Brezhnev raised his arms high in a way that many Americans interpreted to be the gesture of a brash victor, when the Soviet leader meant to signal open friendship.
- Behavioral changes over the course of a meeting may be significant however (e.g.: when a previously animated person becomes more subdued).

Lying and Detecting Lies

- Four factors enhance the ability to lie without getting caught: prior practice or experience in telling similar lies; lack of guilt about lying; confidence in being able to deceive successfully; natural ability to deceive.
- Experiments on behavioral lie detection have indicated that observers can detect a communicator's lies with above-chance accuracy, and that detection accuracy may be enhanced when observers pay special attention to certain vocal and body-movement cues. Observer's accuracy in detecting attempted deception is usually better than chance, though not very high: When the chance level of deception-detection is 50%, actual accuracy typically is about 55%; it usually does not exceed 60%.

Mutual Influence

What we think, feel, and do is inextricably bound up with the corresponding thoughts, feelings, and actions of our counterparts. Specifically:

- Our own physical behavior both influences and reflects the behavior of people with whom we interact.
- That behavior not only manifests our internal feelings; it also affects our emotional state.
- Our emotional state, in turn, shapes how we perceive people and issues in the negotiation process.

Decoding nonverbal communication thus is not a matter of translating isolated gestures. A far more interesting process of mutual influence takes place.

Mimicry

- In conversation, people tend automatically and continuously to mimic and synchronize their movements with the facial expressions, voices, postures, movements, and instrumental behaviors of others.
- Actions are not all that are passed from one person to the other. Feelings migrate just as powerfully because of the constant interplay between physical and emotional states. For example, studies have shown that when strangers are seated facing each other in silence, within a minute or two, the most expressive of the them transmits his or her mood to the others – without a word being spoken!

Mimicry (cont.)

- The transfer of feelings is important because they color how we see the world. Aristotle himself observed that “feelings are conditions that cause us to change and alter our judgments”.
- The negative attitude of one member can leak over to others in a group, and stifle their creativity. By contrast, researchers have found that an upbeat environment fosters mental efficiency, making people better at taking in and understanding information, at using decision rules in complex judgments and being flexible in their thinking.

Body Language Vs. Culture

- Facial expressions are *not* learned behaviors, specific to particular social environments and cultures.
- Expressions for basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust are universally recognized. Wherever on the earth, when shown photographs of men and women making a variety of distinctive faces, people agree on what those expressions mean.
- Cultures, however, may have different norms dictating who is permitted to show which emotions, to whom, and when.

Sources

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